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# THE HISTORICITY OF THE FIRST PATRIARCH.

## A CRITICAL ESSAY

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Once upon a time a group of children gathered about their mother's knee for a story. In answer the mother told of the beginnings of the family; of their heroic deeds, by which their old homestead had been first captured and occupied; of the mistakes which individual members had made; of the checkered family fortunes; of the crushing calamities; of the sustaining hand of God. How, pray, did the children act? At first all listened intently to the mother's tale, entranced by the inspiring personages whom by her word-pictures she brought down to the present time. But soon the most of the little company were wearied by these stories, and, instead of remaining in the twilight to listen to mother's words, ran out into the darkness of the night.

This is ordinarily the fate of the story of the patriarchs. For how highly were they once extolled! The praise of Abraham's faith rang loudly through the centuries. It seemed impossible sufficiently to marvel at the joyous spirit with which this man obeyed the divine impulse to become in a far-off land the founder of a new branch of the race. Not often enough, apparently, could that expression of self-abnegating modesty be repeated: "*If thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right,*" etc. The stirring picture of the hospitality extended to the three men who stopped at his tent could not be too frequently seen. The words of intercession for the diminishing number of the righteous in Sodom, though oft rehearsed, could not be too often heard. But at present many feel forced to thrust the forms of Abraham and the other patriarchs into the dim territory of non-existence. If one speaks of them, you observe a compassionate smile at the steadfast adherence to that which is time honored.

Numerous are the causes of this change which the estimation of patriarchal history has suffered in the minds of very many in the

present day. In the first place, that paralyzing curse, which the dead-stillness of religious belief, in many modern minds, places upon all the events of the past, in which the supernatural forms a factor, makes its contribution. With this first check on the joyous belief in old stories is united very often the doubt cast on the age of the Israelitish historical sources. The third partner in this company of distrust is the common aphorism, "No race knows the beginnings of its history" (*Existenz*). Its twin brother is the dogma: "Peoples arise not through the branchings of a family but only through the mingling of races." Finally the roots of the faith in these old narratives were further cruelly gnawed by the teeth of the theory that the patriarchs were originally simply forms in the mythology of western Asia.

Nevertheless, these giants, which the impetuous modern spirit—in so many instances enveloped in the toga of proud erudition—holds in its train, have not by any means been without worthy antagonists. No, indeed! Many critics have questioned the legitimacy of the axioms just named. Consequently around this assumption of modern presentations of the *exclusive* right to the designation *critical*, there has arisen a vigorous *manifestation of criticism*. In what follows will be recorded the very latest symptoms of life in the critical examination of the so-called "critical" hypotheses, relative to the history of Abraham.

1. For three decades now many modern interpreters of Genesis regarded it proved, beyond further question, that the narration of Abraham's battle with the eastern oppressors of Palestine (Gen., chap. 14) "was to be taken" as a very late, learned, and artificial bit of chronicling.<sup>1</sup> The names of unknown persons and places, which occur therein, serve only for ancient splendor. But this merely ostensible splendor has been scattered to the four winds by an acute investigation of Professor Ernst Sellin.<sup>2</sup> This writer does well to point out the fact that all the names of places in this account have not yet been explained by later terms. Thus the narrator did not, after all, employ archaic names in order to elucidate them later on, and thereby to lend to his narrative an artificial appearance of

<sup>1</sup> Holzinger, *Kurzer Handcommentar* (1898), p. 147.

<sup>2</sup> E. Sellin, "Melchisedek," *Neue kirchliche Zeitschrift* (December, 1905), pp. 929 ff.

antiquity. If the chronicler had wished simply to add to his account an archaic tinge, why did he not then, e. g., define Chazazon-Thamar (vs. 7) by Engedi? Besides, a number of expressions in this narrative recall in a noteworthy way those which are read in the twelve cuneiform texts; these texts which were uncovered in the well-known and deservedly famous excavations of Sellin at Ta 'annek (1904). The narrative most certainly tells of the experienced servants of Abraham whom he summoned to the pursuit of the foreign conquerors (vs. 14). The word there employed (Chanik) brings to mind the chan naku-ka, "thy men," which the assyriologist Fr. Hrozný, Sellin's collaborator, read in the letters found at Ta 'annek.<sup>3</sup> Again, to the familiar phrase, "bread and wine"—which Melchizedek brought out to refresh the warriors returning home from battle—there are the parallels ak alu and shik aru in the Amarna letters (50:23; 51:22; 138:11). These letters also shed much light over ancient Palestine generally.

Now it is true that Wellhausen most emphatically rejected just this very section of the account which deals with Melchizedek. This portion of the fourteenth chapter, he remarks, is a substratum, which was put in place with the intention of furnishing to the payment of tithes at Jerusalem the time-honored support.<sup>4</sup> But Sellin rightly replies, that to begin with the name Salem offers no basis for such an assertion, since this name can be the same as Uru-Salim, which indeed was also found, to the great astonishment of all investigators, in the Amarna letters (180:25, etc.), as the older form of the name Jerusalem. Uru, the form for "city," can be omitted. Further, according to Sellin, Melchizedek is to be accepted as a true element of the tradition, since Ps. 110 is not to be designated Maccabaeian, as it is by a few modern commentators. Indeed, I can add that the latest commentator on the Psalter<sup>5</sup> comes very near placing this psalm in the time of David, and according to my own judgment it is most correctly derived from David. For only just at the close of David's life did the singular instance arise that, even while the king yet lived, his

<sup>3</sup> *Denkschriften der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Wien*, philologisch-historische Klasse, Vol. LII, sec. iii (1905), pp. 37 f.

<sup>4</sup> Wellhausen, *Die Komposition des Hexateuchs*, pp. 310 f.

<sup>5</sup> Chas. A. Briggs, *International Critical Commentary*, on "The Book of the Psalms," Vol. II (1907), p. 374.

successor had already entered on the duties of the office. This fact is also carefully noted by the historian, when he puts in the mouth of David the words: "Blessed be Jehovah, the God of Israel, who hath given one to sit on my throne this day, mine eyes even seeing it" (I Kings 1:48, Am. Rev. Ver.). Consequently the possibility may not be denied that David composed Ps. 110 with direct reference to the new ruling sovereign. Thus, chiefly through Sellin's critical treatise, it was shown that, in Abraham's patriotic espousal of the cause of freedom in his new homeland, there is treasured up a genuine old tradition.

In general, then, the historical data of the patriarchal period may no longer be viewed with so much suspicion as is at present common in so many quarters. For this skepticism unfairly overlooks the many marks of trustworthiness which are found throughout the old Hebrew historical books, and also in those sections dealing with patriarchs. Are not two old annals quoted by name in these records? To be sure; namely: "The Book of Jashar" (the upright) (Josh. 10:13 and II Sam. 1:18) and "The Book of the Wars of 'Yahwe'" (Num. 21:14), i. e., the book of the battles which were fought out under the invisible guidance of the Everlasting One and for his people. Why should not this last source have contained, e. g., an account of that heroic expedition of Abraham? What a plain indication of the disposition to foster old traditions is such a collection of old historical writings in general! But there are other symptoms of the vitality of this disposition in ancient Israel. This people shows not a little solicitude to form for itself *concrete aids to memory*. Was not Goliath's sword hung up in the sanctuary, as a national trophy (I Sam. 21:9)? Did not that monument with the inscription Eben Ezer ("Stone of help," I Sam. 7:12), cast a bright gleam through the centuries? What a remarkable witness to the national and religious homogeneity of Israel was there erected at the Jordan (Josh. 22:26 ff.)! Thus also it is related of Abraham that he planted a tamarisk tree at Beersheba (Gen. 21:23); and even if this tree at the outset was intended perhaps merely to mark a "sacred shrine," yet the long-lived tree served at the same time inevitably as a stimulus to the memory. What a powerful witness to past experiences was also that burial-cave at Hebron!

But in addition there are several *series of incidental statements* which can be called indirect indications of the vigorous zeal with which the ancient Hebrews observed the course of their history. These series begin with the repeated remarks about the *change of urban* names (Gen. 14:2, etc.); of the names of *months*; of the appellation of the prophet (I Sam. 9:9), etc. They continue further in the details about the date, when a city was founded (Num. 13:22) or when a national custom arose (I Sam. 30:25). All this material in point has already been exhaustively gathered by me.<sup>6</sup> In this way that one-sidedness was rectified with which the critical work of the so-called "critical" school noted only such data in the form and contents of the Hebrew historical narratives as were adapted to injure their authority.

Among the positive traces of credibility in the Old Testament one certainly is of fundamental importance for the patriarchal period. This is the fact that Israel, on the whole, differentiated a *pre-Mosaic period in its history*. For, if the glory of Moses as the founder of Israel's national independence had been misleading, how natural would it have been to have dated Israel's beginnings from his rise to power. If the memories of Israel had been so slightly ancient and founded on so slight a basis, as many in modern times represent them, the next step would be to begin Israel's existence simply with Moses. Then he would have been exalted most naturally into a so-called *heros eponymus*. But all the brilliancy, in which the Mosaic epoch shone as the hour of Israel's youth (Hosea 11:1), *did not after all permit that light to languish*, which according to its traditions sparkled from the pre-Mosaic times. With the sun in the zenith they forgot not the gray dawn of the morning. The consciousness of the Israelitish nation that its beginnings reached back beyond Moses' time, and that Jacob and Abraham were even before the bearers of its true mission in the history of civilization, was not extinguished; and the pre-Mosaic history of Israel was not invented for its glorification. For what people has invented for itself a period of ignominy in its past history like the time of Egyptian bondage!

Yes! the *differentiation* in Israel of the *pre-Mosaic period* is a

<sup>6</sup> In my short treatise, *Glaubwürdigkeitsspuren des A. T.*, pub. by Ed. Runge, Gross-Lichterfelde Berlin.

consideration of cardinal importance for the question of the historical reality of the first patriarch.

2. By means of the studies made thus far, which are valid, especially for the *sources* of patriarchal history, we have proved invalid the most formidable objection which has been customarily raised against the actual existence of the first among the patriarchs. But it is perhaps further urged that *no nation knows the origin of its history*.

With the sentence, "In Israel's beginnings the historical reminiscences extend backward no farther than among other races," one of the latest commentaries on the first book of the Bible concludes its treatment.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile the first thing which one should immediately emphasize in opposition is this: Thus the last court, to which the words cited appeal, is *an aphorism*. And the second is the query: Does this general assertion—even if it were indubitably true of all non-Israelites—really find any application among Israelites? Is this *abstract statement* entirely fair with special reference to Israel's preservation of historical data? Does that general verdict take into consideration the psychological and very explicable possibility that a nation which *possessed* exceptionally valuable traditions *could* also set special value on the transmission of their traditioned treasures? For in reality are not those *families* which cherish worthy traditions also most solicitous to hand it down from generation to generation? These questions are not even raised in the commentary on Genesis just mentioned, let alone answered. Both are taken up in my short study referred to above.<sup>8</sup> There it is plainly shown, over against Wellhausen's position, that the indications of Israel's fostering care for traditions and the differentiation into historical periods belong by no means to only one of the Pentateuchal documents.

3. This second theory could be treated somewhat briefly, because it is related to a third view, which prevents the recognition of the historical existence of the patriarchs. It is the thesis: "New nations never arise through the rapid multiplication of a single tribe, new tribes never through descent in one family, though the individual generations be rich in numbers and very numerous." Thus reads a sentence in Stade's *Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (I, p. 28); thus runs

<sup>7</sup> These are the last words in Holzinger's *Kommentar* (p. 271).

<sup>8</sup> *Glaubwürdigkeitsspuren des A. T.*, pp. 39 ff.

another in Holzinger's work on Genesis (1898, p. 270) from which I quoted above, and the same affirmation is repeated by Guthe in his *Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (2d ed., 1904, p. 162). However, no matter how often I read these unqualified declarations, I invariably regret the absence of a slight trifle. Nowhere have I found a single proof of this thesis. To be sure, it is customary to refer to a book by Radloff (in St. Petersburg) which bears the title *From Siberia*, and to continue that he here gives an "instructive description" of how tribes arise even to-day from the fusion of families and races. But that certainly is too narrow a basis to carry that universal conclusion which they deduce; indeed, this unqualified allegation can never be established at all. How, pray, can it ever be proved impossible that in Arabia or some other land many a tribe, large in numbers, did actually arise in essentially the same manner as the narrative in Genesis informs us Abraham's clan did?

But vice versa, the proofs fail not. Just recently I have read that the well-known and justly celebrated Arabist, Th. Nöldeke, recognizes<sup>9</sup> that Omaiya, ancestor of Banû (i. e., sons), Omaiya and other such tribal progenitors are historical personages. Alongside of these there are also several other names which were appropriated from the chief of the respective tribes. Besides this, Carl Grüneisen points out in a very valuable contribution<sup>10</sup> the following statement of the French scholar Fustel de Coulanges:<sup>11</sup>

According to the injunctions of the ancient household worship the sons were in duty bound to render to the father, even after his death, the customary honors. Every year on the anniversary of his death the sons under the leadership of the eldest, who lived together as one family, assembled to offer common oblations at his grave. Soon grandsons reach manhood and are admitted as full members to participation in the common cult. Then the elders die off and the younger generation steps into their places. Thus the circle of the family is considerably enlarged so that very soon it could no more be content with the old dwelling-place. But the cult of the father is transmitted to his progeny and, even if after a series of generations the relationship between the different branches of the family be no longer demonstrable, yet the most intimate conceivable bonds unite it, even the common worship, which the members continue annually to offer at the grave, as

<sup>9</sup> In *Zeitschrift d. deut. morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Vol. XL, p. 159.

<sup>10</sup> *Der Ahnenkultus und die Urreligion Israels* (1900), pp. 233 f.

<sup>11</sup> *La cité antique*, 14th ed., Paris, 1893.



a sacrifice to the founder of the original family—their grandsire, and as well the tutelary deity of their race—and the family name which descends from him on all the individuals in the clan.

In this way is born, according to the well-founded judgment of Fustel de Coulanges, a Roman *gens* or a Greek family, i. e., through the “continual branching-out of a single family.”

Now is it possible to deny what is true of the Latin and Greek races to the posterity of Abraham? This latter race certainly did not lack the common bond of a unique religion, which bound together first the original members and then the succeeding generations. What if representatives now and then strayed away from the deep convictions and high aims of their great-grandsire—that is ever the course of human history. Among Abraham’s descendants, we most assuredly remember how the rivalry of the sons was bridged over at his grave and the chill of prolonged separation was transformed by the warm glow of common filial piety. For the account of the first patriarch’s death ends thus: “And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah” at Hebron. Why, pray, should not the tribe emigrating to Egypt have developed through the branching-out of one family? We read a relevant statement made by Tacitus (*Germania*, chap. iv): “I accept the opinion of those who conclude that the German peoples have arisen not through mixed marriages with other nations; and consequently they constitute a peculiar and unique race.” Then, again, F. Peiper<sup>12</sup> reaches this conclusion: “A degenerate characteristic of consanguineous marriages has not as yet been demonstrated.” In conclusion it is recorded of several of Abraham’s near posterity<sup>13</sup> that they married wives in part from distant branches of the family and in part from other tribes. After all my prolonged investigations, I must declare that the first steps in Israel’s evolution as a nation could have thus progressed in all that is essential, just as it existed in the historical consciousness of this people, and that the tribe, thus evolving into a nation, could have been throughout the process the posterity of one real historical progenitor. Therefore I must at this point contradict

<sup>12</sup> In his dissertation on *Consanguinität in der Ehe und deren Folgen für die Descendenz* (1902), p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> Gen. 24:4 ff.; 46:10; Exod. 6:15.

the author of the latest solution to the question of Abraham's historical reality.<sup>14</sup> Although he purposes to defend his historicity, yet at the same time he expresses himself as follows: "The wandering of an Edomite tribe is recounted in the same words as the expedition of Abraham." But the proof is entirely lacking, and therefore the conclusion based on that allegation, namely, that Israel's emigration concerned not the departure of a single person merely, or of a family, but the movement of an entire tribe. His further notion that Abraham's name is to be regarded at the same time as the symbol, the type, the representative of a large migratory and colonizing process, is neither drawn from the sources nor is it consistent with their clear presentation of the facts. The first patriarch appears in all source-narratives a simple human personality, as will be demonstrated in detail in paragraph 4 immediately below—if this can still be deemed necessary.

The author of the latest pamphlet on Abraham has permitted himself to be carried along—to be sure in a manner very easily explicable—by a current which in such presentations sweeps widely just at this moment. This influence appears in such a statement as the following: "Abraham was not progenitor in an ethnographical but in a religious sense."<sup>15</sup> How enticing at first glance is this statement. Nevertheless it is—not ancient oriental but modern—illumination of Abraham's history and not at all conformable to the sources. For in the first place this is not the meaning of the passages which the originator of this new assertion used in his propositions, viz.: Gen. 12:2: "I will make of thee a great nation" (Am. Rev. Ver.), and Num. 14:12: "I will make of thee a nation greater and mightier than they" (Am. Rev. Ver.). Secondly, this does not represent the sense of the Old Testament words, because Abraham is designated "father of the faithful" *on a higher level in the history of redemption*. Least of all, thirdly, is this new view established by the assertion that the usual import of Old Testament words applied to Abraham and his son Isaac represent an "ethnographic misconception." Besides, this last proof has great similarity to the sentence in which the same author designates as a "fatal dogma" the Old Testament declaration that a significant

<sup>14</sup> F. Wilke, *War Abraham eine historische Person?* (1907), p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> Alfred Jeremias, *Das A. T. im Lichte des alten Orients* (1906), p. 327.

relationship, deeply religious, existed between Abraham and Israel. And why? Because in his eyes such an affirmation in the Old Testament leads straight "to particularism." However, the words in question never led in this direction when competent authorities were the guides. This truth can be overlooked only by one who, like Friedrich Delitzsch in one instance,<sup>16</sup> simply drops out the sentence from the primary source about Abraham's call: "And in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed." Do not the prophecies, let me ask, about the ascent of the nations to the mountain of the Lord, etc. (Isaiah 2:2-4, etc.), still exist in the Old Testament? *Whom alone* does the Old Testament's statement concerning Abraham's place in the scheme of salvation lead astray to an idea of particularism? Only narrow-minded persons who think it is right to circumscribe the broad vision in the divine plan of redemption. Is it because of these narrow-minded souls that Abraham should no longer be designated the true ancestor of Israel? On account of such should men speak only of the "forefather in the religious sense"? How then, pray, could that sentence "in thy seed, etc.," which comes instantly to mind, have been penned? This fresh statement, therefore, does not correspond to historical truth. This new notion cannot displace the evidence of the sources to the effect that Abraham was a real historical individual.

<sup>16</sup> *Babel und Bibel*, II, p. 38; and cf. the Preface.